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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: EX-MILITANTS CLAIM KONGRA-GEL "PEACEFUL"

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Classified By: Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: A group of ex-convict PKK militants faxed a letter to the Embassy making reference to the January U.S.-Turkey-Iraq talks on the PKK and claiming that the PKK successor organization Kongra-Gel seeks a peaceful solution to its conflict with the Turkish State. Officials from the pro-Kurdish Democracy People's Party (DEHAP) asserted to us they had not seen the letter -- though it was faxed from DEHAP headquarters -- but said DEHAP shares the Group's goals. The DEHAP leaders insisted the party has no links with the PKK. They said DEHAP, which faces separatism charges, seeks greater political rights and cultural/linguistic freedoms for Kurds within Turkey. DEHAP's continued association with the PKK limits the party's influence and may lead to its closure. End Summary.

Letter Claims Kongra-Gel "Peaceful"

12. (U) A PKK-related organization called the "Peaceful and Democratic Solution Group" in January faxed a letter to the Embassy claiming that "Kongra-Gel," the latest iteration of the PKK, seeks a peaceful solution to its conflict with the Turkish State. The one-page letter, in Kurdish, is addressed to the governments of the United States, Iraq, and Turkey, and makes reference to the January trilateral talks on the PKK. In the letter, the Group maintains that the "Kurdish question" is a regional, rather than a Turkey-specific, issue. It states that the fighting in Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict are creating tension in the region, and that the Kurds want to help establish peace and stability. The authors claim that Kongra-Gel has long sought a peaceful resolution to the conflict in southeastern Turkey, which is why the organization declared a unilateral cease-fire in 1999. "It has shown over the past six years that it wants a peaceful and democratic solution within the integrity of Turkey," states the letter.

DEHAP Defends Substance of Letter

3 (U) DEHAP President Tuncer Bakirhan asserted to us he had not seen the letter, though it was faxed from DEHAP headquarters. He acknowledged that he had met with the Group, whose members are former PKK militants who turned themselves in and have been released after serving their time in prison. The Group has 25 members, 19 of whom have been released from prison; it has no headquarters. Both Bakirhan and Tayyip Yildiz, president of the DEHAP Adana branch,

claimed to us that the Group is not associated with DEHAP, although both organizations share the goal of reaching a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue. In separate meetings, Emboff and Adana PO reminded the DEHAP officials that the U.S. considers the PKK a terrorist organization, not a group seeking peaceful resolution. Bakirhan and Yildiz acknowledged the U.S. position, but insisted that the PKK -- at least the portion of it that now follows the Kongra-Gel banner -- has forsaken violence. Yildiz speculated that Group members were inspired to send the letter out of fear that the trilateral talks on the PKK spelled the first step toward an imminent U.S. military attack on the PKK, which they believe "would not contribute to a peaceful solution of the Kurdish problem." We challenged the Group's claim that the PKK had held to a unilateral cease-fire over the past six years. The PKK called an end to the cease-fire in September 2003, and, in any case, PKK attacks continued after the supposed cease-fire was declared in 1999. Bakirhan acknowledged that the PKK had called off the cease-fire, but asserted that "even the Turkish Government admits" that PKK attacks declined after 1999.

DEHAP President Denies PKK Links

14. (U) Prosecutors in 2003 charged DEHAP with operating as a separatist organization, and the party could be closed if the Constitutional Court rules against it. Several of DEHAP's predecessors were closed by the State. Bakirhan, however, averred that there are no links of any kind between the PKK and DEHAP -- no secret communication nor covert influence. DEHAP is a political party; the PKK is an illegal organization. The two organizations do not share the same methods. What they have in common is a shared grassroots -- the Kurds, particularly in the southeast -- and a shared goal of promoting Kurdish rights.

Four-Part "Solution" to Kurdish Issue

15. (U) We pressed Bakirhan and Yildiz to define the "solution" they seek. They insisted DEHAP is not promoting separatism, only greater freedoms for Kurds within Turkey. Bakirhan described what he views as the four elements of a solution:

-- In Kurdish-majority areas of the country, Kurdish should be the language of instruction in public schools. Turkish would still be the official language of the country, and students in Kurdish areas would be required to take a Turkish course. Bakirhan dismissed the private Kurdish language courses, recently opened as a result of EU-related reforms, as meaningless.

-- Kurds should play a greater role in local governance in the Kurdish-dominated southeast. Governors in Turkey are appointed, and have more authority than elected mayors. Bakirhan said governors should be elected. Moreover, the requirement that a party receive 10 percent of the national vote to enter Parliament should be eliminated; DEHAP, like many parties, fell short of the 10 percent barrier in the 2002 elections and holds no seats in Parliament. Bakirhan argued that the barrier should be completely eliminated. In addition, DEHAP candidates should be allowed to campaign without being detained by police on frivolous charges for speaking Kurdish or "promoting separatism."

-- The State should develop the economy of the southeast, engaging in "positive discrimination" by channeling a significant portion of state investment to the region.

-- The State should come clean about the atrocities committed by security forces during the PKK conflict. Mass graves should be investigated. When we raised the issue of PKK atrocities, Bakirhan agreed that the PKK should also acknowledge its acts of terrorism.

¶6. (U) Yildiz asserted that solving the Kurdish issue will require the GOT to enact a general amnesty for PKK militants. He said the USG should persuade the GOT to take such a step.

¶7. (U) We told the DEHAP leaders that the U.S. supports the equal rights of all individuals; we do not advocate special "group rights." Every Turkish citizen should be free to speak or write in his mother tongue. But educating children in Kurdish would produce a generation of Turkish Kurds disadvantaged by weak Turkish-language skills. Moreover, the EU, as well as the U.S., now officially regards the PKK as a terrorist organization, and DEHAP must distance itself from the PKK if it wants to be taken seriously as a political party. If DEHAP did not appear to be so closely associated with the PKK, and if it developed a broader-based agenda and a less ideologically leftist orientation, it might draw more voters outside the southeast and manage to cross the 10 percent threshold for entering Parliament. Bakirhan pointed to the establishment of a DEHAP successor party (reftel) as an effort to address some of those issues.

Comment

¶8. (C) DEHAP's tacit support for this letter, despite our continuous repetition of the U.S. position on the PKK, is yet another indication of how the parameters of the Kurdish issue remain unchanged despite human right-related GOT legislative reform. DEHAP claims to represent "the Kurds" and aspires to reach a resolution with the Turkish State over the PKK issue and the broader question of Kurdish rights. But the party's influence is largely limited to the southeast, and even there its leftist orientation is alien to the generally pious Kurdish population, a fact that the ruling AK Party managed to exploit in the March 2004 local elections. It continues to associate itself in various ways with the PKK, a tactic that may cause it to be next in the line of pro-Kurdish parties closed by the State. The State authorities, meanwhile, continue to apply the logic that, because the PKK advocates Kurdish language and cultural rights, anyone who adopts such positions is a PKK member. This practice effectively prevents alternative Kurdish voices from emerging and renders impossible a serious dialogue on the Kurdish issue.

EDELMAN